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ABSTRACT

Journals can be valuable tools for fostering adult learning and experience. Research has supported the following assumptions about learning from journals: (1) articulating connections between new and existing knowledge improves learning; (2) writing about learning is a way of demonstrating what has been learned; (3) journal writing accentuates favorable learning conditions; and (4) reflection encourages deep rather than surface learning. Opponents of assessment argue that evaluating learners' journal writing may intrude on learners' privacy and expectations of confidentiality and that developing objective criteria to assess the process or product of journal writing is difficult. Proponents of assessment state that developing objective assessment criteria is not only possible but may help instructors guide others in reflection, that reviewing journals gives instructors valuable data on students' learning processes, and that assessment may be necessary to ensure participation. The following guiding principles are offered for educators who decide to use journals in adult learning: (1) make confidentiality and boundary setting essential; (2) provide equitable feedback; (3) guard privacy and focus on learning rather than therapy; (4) practice the reflection you preach; and (5) provide clear explanations and guidelines. Learners should be given examples of the following types of possible journal entries: descriptive, metacognitive, analytic, evaluative, and reconstructive. (Contains 19 references.) (MN)

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF
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by Sandra Kerka

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Journal Writing as an Adult Learning Tool

"The journal holds experiences as a puzzle frame holds its pieces. The writer begins to recognize the pieces that fit together and, like the detective, sees the picture evolve" (Williamson 1997, p. 98). The journal, a container of experience, is used in many ways to foster reflection and adult learning. This *Brief* reviews the research and practice literature and describes issues and methods involved in incorporating journal writing in adult education.

Journals, Reflection, and Learning

A journal is a crucible for processing the raw material of experience in order to integrate it with existing knowledge and create new meaning. Among the many purposes for journal writing are the following: to break habitual ways of thinking; enhance the development of reflective judgment and metacognition; increase awareness of tacit knowledge; facilitate self-exploration and personal growth; and work out solutions to problems (Andrusyszyn and Davie 1997; Mitchell and Coltrinari 2001; Moon 1999). Moon (1999) and Carroll (1994) discuss theories and research that support a number of assumptions about learning from journals:

- Articulating connections between new and existing knowledge improves learning.
- Writing about learning is a way of demonstrating what has been learned.
- Journal writing accentuates favorable learning conditions—it demands time and space for reflection, encourages independent thought and ownership, enables expression of feelings, and provides a place to work with ill-structured problems.
- Reflection encourages deep rather than surface learning.

English and Gillen (2001) report a dearth of research on the effectiveness of journal writing in adult education, although a few studies have demonstrated changes in thinking (Jasper 1999); more fluency in writing and language (Myers 2001); increased quality of group discussion and course performance (Kember et al. 1999; Parkyn 1999); and, in health care settings, better integration of learning and clinical practice (Jasper 1999). Journals are considered an effective way to socialize learners to academic discourse and institutional culture (Garland 1999; Myers 2001) and enhance the learning of English as a second language (Carroll 1994; Myers 2001).

At the heart of learning through journal writing is reflection, the process of exploring events or issues and accompanying thoughts and emotions. Moon (1999) outlines a "map" of the reflective writing process. She calls it a map to convey that the process is flexible rather than a linear sequence of activities. The map depicts—

- **A purpose** for journal writing that guides selection of topics
- **Description** of events or issues (observations; comments on personal behavior, feelings, and context)
- **Linkage** to related material (further observations, relevant knowledge or experience, suggestions from others, theory, new information)
- **Reflective thinking** (relating, experimenting, exploring, reinterpreting from other points of view, theorizing)
- **Other processes** (testing new ideas, representing material in other forms such as through graphics or dialogue)
- **Product** (statement of something that has been learned or solved, identification of new issue or question)
- **Further reflection** leading to resolution or looping back to an earlier step

However, before using a reflective tool such as a journal in teaching, educators should consider whether they uncritically accept reflection as inherently good and whether the culture in which they teach supports it (Conway 1999; English 2001).

All adults may reflect, but not all reflection results in learning. Although mental reflection may occur spontaneously, "written reflection is not a *natural* process, but has to be learned and practiced" (Jasper 1999, p. 459). There is disagreement over whether reflection can be taught, but structured techniques may help prepare learners (ibid.). Individuals may resist reflection for a number of reasons, such as attitudinal barriers (self-doubt; fear of exposure; finding it threatening, painful, or uncomfortable) or situational barriers (lack of time, overconcern with spelling and grammar) (Garland 1999; Jasper 1999). The evaluative culture of education is itself another barrier (Mitchell and Coltrinari 1999). Orem's (1997) analysis of the journals of prospective teachers "reveals a resistance by most to go beyond a superficial reflection of their professional lives... For a journal to be truly an instrument of transforming personal learning, the learner may need to be convinced of the safety of expressing what could be critical comments to someone who has power to award a grade to their overall performance" (p. 154).

Assessment Issues

Orem's comment highlights a major debate surrounding journal writing: should learner journals be assessed and if so, how? In the case against assessment is the argument that it intrudes on learner privacy. Awareness that the writing will have an audience, particularly an instructor or external assessor in a certain power relationship to the learner, will inhibit thought, encourage self-censorship, and shape what is written. The learner may, as Conway (1999) puts it, "play the game" and give the assessor only what the course requirements demand. Mannion (2001) remarks that students who adopt such a "course feedback" style "are construed as receiving little benefit from the exercise. It is not construed that perhaps...their thinking about course design itself was a valid critical reflection!" (p. 113). Boud (2001) asserts that "unless they feel sufficiently free to write things that they would be embarrassed for me to read, then they are probably not using their journals sufficiently well enough for them to be good examples of reflection" (p. 16).

In addition to privacy and confidentiality are the issues of what is to be assessed and how: The process or the product? The learning or the quality of the reflection? (Moon 1999). Regarding the latter, can there be objective criteria with which to measure an individual's personal development consistently and equitably ("Encouraging" 2001)? Kember et al. (1999) devised a coding scheme based on Mezirow's seven categories of reflection, which eight judges applied to student reflective journals. "Disagreements over coding resulted from differing interpretations of the significance of what students had written rather than from a lack of precision in the guidelines for coding categories" (p. 18). To which Conway (1999) retorts: "This privileging of an instrumental measure over the reality of the learner is reductionist and based on a positivistic notion of an ultimate truth" (p. 57).

Arguments in favor of assessment include the following ("Encouraging" 2001; Moon 1999): (1) if reflection is highly esteemed for development, we should be able to define criteria; (2) individuals who tend naturally to use a reflective approach may take the process for granted, so defining assessment criteria would help instructors guide others in reflection; (3) review of journals gives instructors valuable data on students' learning processes; and (4) assessment may be necessary to ensure participation.

To resolve the issue, Moon suggests reframing assessment not as evaluation but as review of journal writing by instructor, self, or peers to determine its value as learning method. Carefully chosen criteria for

this review could include the following (Moon 1999; Orem 1997): *adequacy of entries* (length, presentation, number and regularity of entries, clarity in presentation of events, systematic and complete chronological documentation); *formative comments* (avoid writing comments in first person; avoid suggestion of judgment; ask questions when clarification is needed); and *indirect assessment* (evaluation of work based on the journal, not the journal itself). Moon (1999) suggests criteria based on her map of reflective writing: (1) demonstrates awareness and understanding of the *purpose* of the journal, uses it to guide selection and description of events/issues; (2) *description* provides adequate focus for further reflection and includes additional ideas; (3) *reflective thinking* is evident—ability to work with unstructured material, theory-practice link, different points of view of event, metacognition, application of theory, alternative interpretations, testing of new ideas; and (4) *product*—there is a statement of something that has been learned or solved, a sense of moving on.

Putting Journals into Practice

Given the importance of reflection as an outcome and the concerns about assessment, how might educators use journals with adult learners? English (2001) offers the following guiding principles: (1) *respect*—making confidentiality and boundary setting essential; (2) *justice*—providing equitable feedback; (3) *beneficence*—guarding privacy, focusing on learning rather than therapy; (4) *self-awareness*—practicing the reflection you preach; and (5) *caring*—providing clear expectations and guidelines. One set of guidelines gives learners examples of the types of reflective entries they might write ("Encouraging" 2001; Mitchell and Coltrinari 2001):

- **Descriptive**—What happened?
- **Metacognitive**—What were your thoughts, feelings, assumptions, beliefs, values, attitudes?
- **Analytic**—What were the reasoning and thinking behind actions and practices?
- **Evaluative**—What was good or bad? What are the implications?
- **Reconstructive**—What changes might be made? What are plans for future actions?

A journal may be an individual or a group activity. Group interactive journals are often used in online courses to alleviate psychosocial distance and create learning communities (Parkyn 1999). E-journaling has been found to encourage dialogue on multiple levels—learner to learner, learner to instructor, group, and self; to break up traditional social hierarchies; and to improve reflection on readings and participation in discussions (ibid.). As with print journals, some learners feel the e-journal provides a safer environment for self-expression than the classroom (Myers 2001; Parkyn 1999). Like other forms of distance education, e-journaling is subject to such issues as time constraints, anonymity, optimal group size, netiquette, and technical skill and support (Parkyn 1999). Written for an audience of peers, the group or team journal—whether online or in print—makes possible an exchange of energy and ideas and a synergistic process of co-learning (Andrusyszyn and Davie 1997).

At the same time, writing for an audience can inhibit reflection. Cooper (2001) and Williamson (1997) advocate a mix of both individual and group journal activities. In Cooper's business law course, the group journal serves as a record of activities and learning processes (individual and group answers to guiding questions, record of group meetings). A key section includes group reflections and commentary on current issues and events as well as individual critical incident analyses. "The mix of the journal, between individual and group work, between development of group maintenance skills and the substantive tasks involving the group learning" is crucial to its success (p. 124), resulting in development of critical thinking and increased understanding of teamwork and interpersonal relations. Prospective adult educators in Williamson's course contributed to a common research diary recording the group's experiences, achievements, and difficulties; they also maintained a personal journal for reflections, critical thinking, and metacognitive exploration. Both forms of writing are needed in order to document learning-in-action.

Journal writing is full of paradox: "personal, intimate, unique for each diarist, this is nevertheless a shared journey" (Schiwy 1996, p. 299). For journals to succeed as learning tools, adult educators and learners must make a mutual commitment to sustained engagement in the reflective learning process.

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